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AUTHOR Eiduson, Bernice T.
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ABSTRACT

Fifty Caucasian, never-married single mothers aged 18-30, who had opted to keep their babies, were studied longitudinally from the last trimester of pregnancy through the first three years of their children's lives in order to learn the extent to which they had reinterpreted traditional roles and responsibilities and had restructured their lives. Their values, attitudes, aspirations for their children, child rearing practices, family organization and activities were documented through naturalistic home observations, detailed interviews and questionnaires, and self reports of daily routines. The development of their children was assessed periodically through structured and semi-structured tests so that aspects of cognitive physical, and socio-emotional growth could be monitored. A picture of three different types of single mothers (nest builders, post hoc adapters and unwed mother) each with fairly distinct attitudes, expectations and experiences, emerged from the data. After a description of the single mother's backgrounds, their roles as parents, their values, attitudes and parenting behaviors are discussed. Policy planning implications of the findings for service delivery are indicated. (Author/RH)

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Contemporary Single Mothers*

Bernice T. Eiduson

University of California at Los Angeles

The single mother, an appelation which once designated young women who became pregnant out of wedlock without the option of abortion, now also embraces women who have elected to have a child and to become a household head without a man in the picture. Many of these women had been identified with the Women's Movement and have seen themselves as pioneers in developing a new family style. As a group, however, these single mothers have often been overlooked because the census combines them with divorced or widowed women in reported statistics of the rapidly growing number of single parent households. (Such households are increasing 19 times as rapidly as dual parent ones, with a 73 percent increase in the number of women heading single parent households since 1970.)

In order to see how and to what extent contemporary, elective single mothers reinterpret traditional roles and responsibilities and re-

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structure their lives, we began to study a group of these mothers in 1973. Our subjects were 50 Caucasian, never-married single mothers, aged 18-30, who had opted to keep their babies. These women were studied longitudinally, from the last trimester of pregnancy through the first three years of their children's lives. Their values, attitudes, aspirations for their children, child rearing practices, family organization and activities were documented through naturalistic home observations, detailed interviews and questionnaires, and self reports of daily routines. When these data were first analyzed, there emerged not a composite profile of "the" elective single mother, but rather a picture of three different types of single mothers, each with fairly distinct attitudes, expectations and experiences. Further analyses were made to compare these three subgroups of the single mother sample.

The single mother population was one of four family lifestyle groups being studied simultaneously. The study included 50 mothers in traditional nuclear families (two married parents living together with a child) and a total of 150 mothers in alternative arrangements: 50 in living groups or communities, the contemporary extended families; 50 in "social contract" relationships (two unmarried parents living together with a child), and the 50 single parent families under discussion here.

Finally, the development of offspring of these single mothers was assessed periodically through structured and semi-structured tests, so that aspects of cognitive, physical, and socio-emotional growth could be monitored (see Eiduson, 1978; Eiduson and Alexander, 1978; Eiduson and Weisner, 1978).

From our extensive data on the single-mother family I shall try to summarize the picture of this parent who has been little studied or ac-

knowledged to date. After describing her background, I shall focus on her roles as a parent, her values, attitudes and behaviors, and the issues that warrant our attention as she rears an infant and preschool child.

Background Characteristics

First, a glimpse into her background: The elective single mother in our sample averaged 25 ± 4.5 years of age and came from a middle-class or stable working class background. She averaged approximately 13.9 years of schooling; only 14% of the 50 women lacked a high school diploma and 25% had a college degree. In these demographic features, single mothers were comparable to mothers in the other alternative groups (the social contract and extended family arrangements). In regard to size of their own family of origin (i.e., the mothers' own parents and siblings), place in the family, and other such background characteristics, these women also appeared to be similar to women in all the other groups studied (Cohen & Eiduson, 1975). There were, however, three differences between the families of origin of the alternative women in general and those of the traditionally married. Alternative women's families made a significantly greater number of residential moves during the women's childhood, and had a significantly greater number of remarriages than the families of the traditionally married. Also, in general, alternative mothers perceived their relations with their own parents in childhood more negatively than did the traditional married population; however, among the alternatives, the single mothers reported having been closest to parents.

Typology

When entering the study, most single mothers had glibly spoken of their desire and right to have a baby even though they were single and

their family style from the outset did not conform to norm. However, more intense study of their attitudes at pregnancy, their aspirations and expectations for the child, and their affiliation with the alternative philosophy led some members of our project group (Kornfein, Martin & Weisner, 1976) to recognize the within-group variability among the single mothers and to suggest the following typology which identify the subsets:

1. Nest-builders: This group (one fourth of the whole) had consciously planned to become pregnant and frequently selected (with some thought) the man who might be a suitable father. Nest-builders were distinguishable from other single mothers in being more highly educated (two Ph.D.s in the sample), the most vocationally competent and experienced, and the most career-oriented. They lived by themselves, had the highest income, and were the most economically, socially and psychologically self-sufficient.

2. Post Hoc Adapters: These women had not intended to become pregnant; however, once pregnant, they did not avail themselves of abortion because they felt happy about their situation and felt able to adapt to and enjoy the circumstances. These women lived alone, or with other female friends in rooms or an apartment, or with relatives, such as siblings or aunts. Work experience had been primarily in administrative, business, clerical or skilled jobs. Education was more limited than in the case of the Nest-builders, and vocational goals were less specific.

3. Unwed Mothers: The backgrounds and attitudes of these women regarding their "fate" had such a strong resemblance to those of the unwed teenage pregnant girl, about whom so much has been written,

that the label "unwed mother" seemed most apt. These women had the lowest competencies of all the elective single mothers. Work prior to pregnancy had been clerical, skilled or semi-skilled, and annual income was at least $1,000.00 lower than that of the Post Hoc group. Some Unwed Mothers still resided with their own parents. They anticipated pregnancy unhappily, but they did not choose abortion because, as Luker (1977) has suggested in regard to another single mother population, the benefits of having a child seemed to outweigh the benefits of not having one. The benefits they perceived seemed both financial (expected Aid to Dependent Children) and psychological.

Values

This typology proved heuristically interesting, as the values, belief systems, and perspectives of the contemporary single mother were studied (Rocheford, Cohen & Weisner, 1978). We had hypothesized a strong anti-conventional thrust in the single mothers as a group because of their anti-mainstream behavior in regard to having a baby. Analysis of data, however, showed a significant range in the single mother population. The most salient finding in regard to the single mother sample was, first, the close alignment of these mothers' values with some of the values espoused by traditional married parents, and secondly, the split of the group in their value identification: at times being like the alternatives, at other times, like the traditionals.

For example, single mothers placed high values on the conventional rewards of achievement--money, status, and advancement--as did the traditional marrieds. Their similarity to traditional marrieds was also evident in their educational and vocational aspirations. For example, when asked during pregnancy how far they would like their child to go

in school, 35% of single mothers suggested college, a figure significantly closer to the 48% of traditional marrieds than to the 15% range of the other two alternative groups. Similarly, a significantly higher percentage of single mothers and traditional mothers desired their child in professional or artistic careers, as compared with the more alternative groups who wanted to leave vocational choice exclusively to the child. But swinging toward the alternative perspective, the single mothers were much less concerned with materialism; and, like the social contract and living group mothers, they were strongly drawn to sensory and intuitive means of apprehension, seeing these as valuable modes for problem-solving to supplement or supplant scientific and rational ways of thinking.

Further, the within-group variability among single mothers played a role in their value affiliations. Their attitudes regarding sex equality, which might generally be assumed to be favored by the elective single mother, provide a case in point. In ratings of sex equality, the scores of Nest-builders were indeed high, but scores of Post Hoc Adapters were in the middle of those of the total population, and scores of Unwed Mothers (like those of the traditional marrieds) were low. The same direction of within-group differences was found in regard to the extent to which planning for the future was part of the family philosophy.

Pregnancy and Parenting in the First Year

Attitudes and behavior in anticipation of parenthood showed a vacillation of single mothers between traditional and alternative perspectives. During pregnancy all sought prenatal care, became conscious of nutritional intake, and reduced their drug use, as did all of

the alternatives in general. In addition, the single mother had hospital deliveries almost exclusively (94% had a doctor in attendance, and 74% used anesthetics in their deliveries). This is the same pattern of behavior during birth as found in the traditional mothers' group, a pattern significantly different from that of the other alternative populations. During her child's infancy, the single mother was the main or almost exclusive caretaker for the child. This pattern dominated the other three groups as well; however, it was not in accord with attitudes expressed during the anticipatory period. At that time the other alternative populations, the women in socal contract and living groups, had expected to be full-time caretakers for their children, whereas the single mothers and the traditionals had not. Among single mothers, 93% breast-fed their babies and 7% were still breastfeeding when the child turned two. This pattern at year two resembled that of the alternatives more than the traditionals. Furthermore, the children of single mothers slept in the mother's room in 45% of the cases at year one and in 25% of the cases at year two; this is a pattern more like that of the alternatives than the traditionals, for in the latter group 85% of children had their own rooms by one year.

In feelings about parenthood, single mothers as a group were not different from other groups. About 40% of them found parenting more difficult than anticipated; they felt ignorant about child-rearing, and to a lesser extent, became sensitive to how much of their own time was invested in the child and how much this curtailed other interests. The single mother group was the only group that showed a preference for a female child prior to birth: that preference was in fact granted, for 60% of them had girls, as compared to 52% of the total population stud-

led. In contrast, the traditional marrieds had significantly more boys than girls, although they had not expressed such a preference.

On the Newborn Neurological Examination (Parmalee & Michaelis, 1971), single mother babies scored lower, but not significantly lower, than other groups. Their scores were close to the mean and standard deviation for the total group, which was in the normal range, and 11% of the scores were one standard deviation or more below average. Scores on the mothers' condition during birth, as obtained on the Obstretical Complication Scale (Parmalee & Littman, 1977), also were slightly lower for single mothers, but again, not significantly so. Although neither of these measures predicted the child's score on the Bayley at 8 months or 1 year, these data suggest possible factors that may have made child caretaking during infancy a bit more difficult for the single mother group than for others (Elduson, Zimmerman & Bernstein, 1977).

On the Ainsworth Strange Situation Test, administered at one year, the stranger was approached by single parent children significantly more often ($p = .002$) than by other children, both when the mother was in the room and when she left. It must be noted, however, that the single mother children showed more advanced motor development than other youngsters, so that this behavior was obviously easier for them than for any of the others. On the same test, the patterns summarized in the "ABC" patterning showed no significant difference as a function of parent's lifestyle on the children's distress reaction to separation from the mother. However, a discriminant analysis, in which more refined patterns are elucidated, separated the children of the Nest-builders, Post Hoc Adapters and Unwed Mothers more than any

other factor among the one-year data. The Unwed Mothers had more A children--children who seem to deny any separation anxiety, a stance described by Ainsworth as the child's response to rejection (p. 316)--than any other group.

Child-parent interaction scores sampled such characteristics as initiation of contacts by the mother, caretaker response to child-initiated contacts, affect changes, etc., in a single 3-hour noon feeding period. Here the single mother appeared different from other mothers only in summary scores of intensity and variability of social and nonsocial stimulation. As a group, the single mothers, especially those with a second child, scored low on these dimensions. Differences were not significant in attentiveness during caretaking. Also, children of single mothers had the same number and variety of toys as did children in other families.

To describe the ecological niche the single mother creates for herself and the child during the first year, a large number of adjectival ratings made by observers at the 6-month period were summarized, intercorrelated and then factored (Weisner & Weibel, in preparation). The four factors which emerged to characterize the mothers' homes were disorderliness or "funkiness"; intellectuality, particularly as indicated by the presence of books or intellectual objects; child-orientation and warmth; and decorative complexity. Homes of single parent families were not particularly strong on any single factor. A sizeable percentage of single mothers' homes were rated disproportionately (compared to other groups) at both low and high ends of the warmth/child orientation factor. They also ranked low on decorative complexity and on disorderliness.

Satisfaction and Mobility

After one year the single mothers, of all the mothers, were the least satisfied with their fate (Kornfein, 1978). Twenty-one (42%) expressed ambivalence toward their lifestyle and ten (20%) were openly negative. These figures were significantly greater than for any other family groups. Single mothers expressed a desire for marriage and companionship for themselves. They were significantly more often concerned about how their child was developing, especially in regard to emotional and nutritional growth.

One explanation for their dissatisfactions may be that the income and earnings of single mothers, during the period studied, proved to be the lowest of all the groups, with the mean of approximately $5,500 consisting of welfare, and, for one third of the group, some part-time work. At the time of the child's infancy, only 10% of the single mothers were in the high SES groups, 36% were in the middle, and over 50% were in the lowest SES groups. Their downward mobility comes out unequivocably through comparison with the SES they enjoyed in their families of origin, for 30% of the single mothers are down "1 or 2 steps" and only about one-third of them are ranked in the SES in which they grew up. Their educational level is also lower than that of their parents.

A further indication of dissatisfaction is evident in changes from the single mother unit into another family style. By the time children were one year old, 13 or 26% of the single mothers had left single motherhood, a trend that was continued at the 18 month period, when 17 or 34% were in other family styles. Of this group, 7 had become traditional marrieds, 7 were cohabiting with a male mate, and three

women had gone into a living group. By the time children were 18 months old, only 56% of the elective single mothers were in the same residential situation (i.e., sharing a home with the same people) as they had been when their child was born: the majority were still living in a small family situation, but 14% were at that point with grandparents, 6% were with other members of their family of origin, siblings or aunts, 8% were with roommates, and were in collectives. In their rate and direction of change in family style, both in legal marital status and residential situation, they were like the other alternative groups, all of whom sharply contrasted with the traditional marrieds, 91% of whom had experienced no change.

The Post Hoc Adaptors made many more changes than did the other single mothers. About half the Post Hoc Adaptors changed their family style before their child's first birthday, compared to 30% of the Unwed Mothers and 15% of the Nest-builders. This pattern is consistent with our typology in which the Nest-builders are more settled, so to speak, and the Post Hoc Adaptors are most likely to experiment with different relationships. Also, the Post Hoc Adapters moved much more frequently than the Nest-builders or Unwed Mothers. When looking at the total number of household member changes and geographic moves, the Post Hoc Adapters still made the most changes. This is again consistent with our typology in which the Nest-builders had the motivation and ability to build a firm foundation for single parenthood, while the Unwed Mothers in their dependent status had fewer options, and the Post Hoc Adapters, in adapting to necessity, moved from situation to situation.

This factor of mobility is an important variable in understanding the elective single mother. It reflects her seeking of new options when dissatisfactions occur and her search for change in change, as well as the experimental flair that probably led to her decision to have and keep a baby initially. In this regard the single mothers' behaviors may help tell us what the contemporary "here-and-now" perspective of young people is about.

Parenting the Toddler and Preschooler

Parenting behavior of the single mother after 18 months of motherhood is distinguished by a number of characteristics. First, in home observations at the dinner hour, the single mother children showed the lowest number of child-initiatied, as opposed to parent-initiated, interactions. Yet children were seldom ignored. When responses of mothers to child-initiated interactions were quantified, it appeared that the single mothers, like the traditional marrieds, tended to be extremely tuned in to their children, responding readily to requests for interaction. While this behavior was characteristic of single mothers and traditional marrieds, it was not prevalent in social contract households or living groups. Second, the percentage of children who were observed moving out of visual sight of the single mother was about half as great as the percentage who moved out of sight of the mother in other families. The majority of single mother children moved back and forth in the mother's vicinity throughout the period (Jenkins, 1978). These data reflect both the smallness of the single parent abode, which is actually smaller in space than other family dwellings, and the importance of the parent to the child.

Another facet of the parent-child relationship worth noting is that at the 18-month period, the single mother group showed the least encouragement of independence of the child (reacting to or countering the child's strivings?) (Eiduson, 1978). This came out both in interviews and in home observational data. More parents in this group admitted ambivalence about the child's growing independence, or openly sought dependence. Relevant to this finding were the responses of single mother children on the Ainsworth Strange Situation Test, discussed above with other data from year one. Also in point are data suggesting that the single mothers were spending slightly (but not significantly) more time with the child alone than were mothers in other groups. At the two-year period, children of single mothers had more limited exposure to women other than their mothers than did children in other groups: the average child in the other three groups saw one or two women other than the mother per week, but only 25% of the single mother children saw this many other women per week. Also, the single mother's child was exposed to men significantly less often than were children of other families.

After two years, 39% of the single mothers were occupied at home exclusively on a full time basis, while 12% worked part-time with the child in day care or in some informal care, and 49% worked full-time with children in day care. By four years, 47% of this group's children were in nursery schools, 2% in informal arrangements, and 49% at home all day--the last a figure which is the highest for any family group.

Eleven single mothers were in school on a full-time basis and ten attended school on a part-time basis, thus comprising a group where attendance was significantly higher than for mothers in other life styles. This trend continued at the two-year, nine-months period.

Caretaking supports for the working single mother were primarily grandparents, and secondarily friends, at both the 18-month and 2-year periods. It was these persons to whom she turned for support when she was ill or away overnight. The single mother group also used babysitters significantly more often to supplement child care by the mother. This is in contrast to the other groups, where friends and the father played larger roles. These data are suggestive of a particularly strong tie between mother and child, perhaps even a longer-than-usual period of mutual dependency. In this regard, preliminary data point to overweight, depression and a need for outside psychological help for the single mothers, data which do suggest some unusual dependency in this group of women.

This hypothesis is being pursued. It must be considered together with evidence of the extent to which these ties result from economic and ecological realities, or represent the socio-psychological needs of the parent, for, in fact, the child defines the mother's social role. In her identity, the child is the major element. While the role of single parent had a highly desirable and valued social status in the early 1970s, especially among the mother's peers, one wonders if it continues to arouse such interest and sense of challenge today.

Summary

The picture of the elective single mother that emerges from our intensive longitudinal studies thus far is as follows:

1. In background and demographic characteristics single mothers were indistinguishable from young mothers who sought a traditional marriage, except that they came from homes in which signs of instability (remarriages, geographic moves)

seemed to be more frequent than in the homes of the conventional mothers.

2. Their values vacillated or distributed bimodally between those of young mothers in other alternative life styles (social contract relationships, living groups) and those of young mothers in conventional marriages. In some of the characteristics deemed particularly relevant to the development and learning experiences of the child (e.g., achievement motivation, educational aspirations for children, pride in maturation and development), they tended to identify with conventional values.
3. The single mothers differed from each other as a function of their education and vocational competence, their age and their economic self sufficiency.
4. Despite some alternative leanings, loneliness and needs for support and affection made most single mothers regard marriage as very desirable after a short time (1-2 years) as household head.
5. Single mothers' lives were marked by residential and life style changes so that they were recreating their own family lives from their childhood in this respect.
6. Beginning between the child's second and third birthdays, they worked and returned to school in greater numbers than did women in other family groups.
7. Their needs for support [illegible]em from economic and psychological caretaking pressures, and perhaps from their own psychology, which may make them perpetuate a dependency in the child that gratifies both the child and themselves.

Policy Implications

What are the policy and planning implications of these findings? The primary goals for the service provider and policy maker are to strengthen the effectiveness of the single mother unit and reduce its vulnerabilities, so that a child is not handicapped. This means recognizing and attacking the problems confronting single mothers. First and foremost, since the economic limitations of many one-parent families put a large percentage of them in the poverty class, the provision of dollars for basic necessities is the most important concern. Associated with economic problems are downward social mobility and frequent residential moves, generally into high-stress neighborhoods; these factors can inhibit and depress parents' activities and foster a sense of instability and rootlessness in the child. Second, programs must be concerned with the negative attitudes towards the one-parent family that are prevalent in our society, oriented as it is toward seeing any unit other than the two-parent nuclear family as deficient. This bias makes the family feel it has a low status in the immediate and extended community, and actually imposes a degree of social isolation on both mother and child. Third, the single mother unit needs legal, health, educational, and child care services, not only for the direct assistance they provide but also for the opportunities they create to integrate mother and child into the community.

To ascertain the specific kinds of services that might be most responsive to need, it may be worthwhile to examine the kinds of self-help efforts that elective single mothers have developed or in which they have sought participation. Examination of these activities provides information on:

1. The ways and extent to which elective mothers involve themselves;

2. The motivation for participation and the rewards they reap; as well as

3. The lacks or gaps in the more institutionalized interventions.

Our studies show that some of the most effective programs, regardless of their level of skill or sophistication, are multi-purpose. This is because there are differences in the women embraced by the "single mother" rubric. The programs that flourish are those that are sufficiently flexible to permit women to have options, to avail themselves of services appropriate to their needs and desired involvement level. Services have to be able to withstand change in contact persons, organizational structure, high attrition rates, cycling- in and out, and resistance to appointments and scheduling.

Professional contact people must be seen as providing social and informational resources for parents. These professionals are therefore likely to be more anxious than they admit, especially around sensitive issues such as:

Whose needs (mother's or child's) have priority when they conflict?

How does the parent get the necessary "r and r" without denying her responsibility to the child?

Who can provide approbation for her parenting efforts, rather than merely help or criticism?

How should problems of housing, work, companionship best be handled in the light of the limitations that child care imposes?

Single mothers' need for training opportunities is self-evident. Our data show that educational and vocational competence are salient variables in attitudes about self and satisfaction with life style as well as in opportunities available. In this regard, attention must be given

to some of the problems of motiviting the parent towards seeking to improve her own life in ways appropriate to her new family framework.

Another goal of programs and policies should be to orient the single mother toward establishing her identity and sense of self based on other multi-faceted roles she plays--not solely on her single mother status. This seems to be especially urgent in order that the child's experiences and growth toward maturity not be hampered by the mother's own need for dependency. The aim of such psychological re-direction necessitates some sophistication in services, but it is not new in the services field. It is certainly an aspect of services and programs that might be most acceptable, and even exciting, to the contemporary elective single mother. Such an orientation would be congruent with the attitudes of some of the most forward-looking women today, women who would be excellent role models for her.

add to Bernice Eiduson's paper on contemporary single mothers for Current Topics in Ch

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